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ABSTRACT

Gerontocratic is a term that is applied to societies that are governed by older men. This document reports the findings of an ethnographic study that investigated the experience of aging women in a traditional gerontocratic society in Kenya. Tribal women's roles and status were the central themes examined in light of dominant characteristics of Samburu culture. Research revealed women's roles are typically predetermined by traditional expectations. Socially acceptable roles are narrowly defined by cultural norms; consequently, role ambiguity and conflict appear minimal. Wife, mother, and kinswoman emerged as dominant roles of adult life. Establishing and maintaining kin relationships is a life-long process. The nature of these relationships determine the attentiveness and care the very old receive, as they are entirely dependent on kin in the absence of any formal services. At any age, women's status is below that of circumcised males. However, there is a marginal increase in position in the clan as the woman makes a place within the family she raises. Women's roles and status are characterized throughout life by continuity, while men's are characterized by change through an age-grade system. Apparently gender is a greater determinant of these themes than age. Conclusions focus on implications of this study for further research concerning women in gerontocratic societies. (Author/JB)

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# ROLE AND STATUS CONTINUITY: A STUDY OF AGING WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL SAMBURU SOCIETY

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Abstract

A study investigating the experience of aging women in a traditional gerontocratic society was conducted. Tribal womens' roles and status were the central themes examined in light of dominant characteristics of Samburu culture. Research revealed women's roles are typically predetermined by traditional expectations. Socially acceptable roles are narrowly defined by cultural norms; consequently, role ambiguity and conflict appear minimal. Wife, mother and kinswoman emerged as dominant roles of adult life. Establishing and maintaining kin relationships is a life-long process. The nature of these relationships determine the attentiveness and care the very old receive as they are entirely dependant on kin in the absence of any formal services. At any age, women's status is below that of circumcised males. However, there is a marginal increase in position in the clan as the woman makes a place within the family she raises. Womens' roles and status are characterized throughout life by continuity, while men's are characterized by change through an age-grade system. Apparently gender is a greater determinant of these themes than age. Conclusions focus on implications of this study for further research concerning women in gerontocratic societies.

# Role and Status Continuity:

## A Study of Aging Women in Traditional Samburu Society

The world's over sixty-five population experiences a net increase of 1.2 million each month. Of this increase, 80% occurs in the world's lesser developed nations. More than half (58%), or 370 million of the world's total elderly population is in lesser developed nations (Kinsella,1988). Yet old age, particularly in non-western societies, is relatively new territory in anthropological study. While older people have usually been players in most ethnographic endeavors because they uniquely possess experience and information, aging has rarely been the theme of vigorous inquiry.

The earliest work on the aged was extracted from ethnographic reports not orginally centered on aging. Leo Simmons, who published "The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society" in 1945, is considered one of the anthropological pioneers in cross cultural studies of the aged. Simmons compared the position of the old in seventy-one societies using the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University. He found that higher status of older people was related to the acquisition of traditional knowledge and skills, property and power. Later, comparative studies, such as Maxwell and Silverman's (1970), determined that increased status of the elderly was related to the control of information. Broad generalizations from these

initial studies included 1) older people fared better in the "good old days" of traditional society as opposed to western culture, and 2) the status of the aged is high in pre-literate societies and low in modern societies (Cowgill and Holmes,1972).

These and other early studies are limited in their generalizability as they looked at aging through secondary analysis and in an isolated context. These studies generally discuss men in the senior or elder age grades and do not clearly define their subjects in chronological or biological terms. It is not clear whether the conclusions drawn were inclusive of data on aging women or soley based on aging men.

Current anthropological research has looked at aging from a more holistic approach. Glascock and Feinman (1980,1981) looked at the status of the elderly in sixty non-western societies and found more than 80% of their sample societies displayed some form of mistreatment for the elderly either from other age groups or by society's design. This study, as well as the findings of Ikels (1980), Maxwell and Maxwell (1980), and Lozier and Althouse (1974), refuted the earlier "all is well " findings of Simmons and Silverman and raised more questions about the aging experience in lesser developed nations.

While the study of the aged in western societies has been plagued with assumptions based on the homogenity of the population, an additional problem exists in the study of cross cultural gerontology. Western researchers have a strong tendency to lump all lesser developed societies

together as though they are a homogenous group, projecting generalizations from one lesser developed culture indiscriminatingly onto all. Yet enormous differences characterize one lesser developed culture from another. Frequently, economic deprivation is the only certain commonality. Generalizations made about aging in lesser developed Asian cultures may be grossly inaccurate when projected onto African tribal societies. Furthermore, generalizations from one African tribal society to another may be equally inaccurate. Fundamental concepts such as the definition of age and the conceptualization of generation may vary from culture to culture.

In many, if not all societies, age and generation are criteria whereby people are formally or informally grouped. The degree to which these organizations are a dominant factor in social order varies greatly among societies. In some traditional societies, all males are assigned to a name, age, and or gender set which forms a rigid social system. Age sets are widespread geographically, but as a dominant mode of social organization they are particularly common in tribes of East Africa as demonstrated by Baxter and Almager (1978) in their study of age set societies.

Gerontocratic is a term that is applied to societies who are governed by older men. Gerontocracy is a recurrent theme among these tribes. It is gerontocracy that encourages age setting and age set rituals which provide elders a platform to exercise their power. Spencer (1965), has produced the most notable account of a gerontocratic society. His study of the

Samburus observed that the traditional age set system served to retain power in the hands of old men. For Samburu males, growing up and growing old means a predetermined sequence of roles and increasing status and authority. Spencer's account of Samburu gerontocracy is enlightening; however, this study reveals little about the experience of women.

Interestingly enough, in a society so structured for men, no age set system typically exists for women. Baxter and Almager's collection of ethnographic essays concentrates on rules and relationships of men across age sets in several tribes. Sangree's (1969,1986) study of the Tiriki discussed social status in relation to age sets, while Gulliver focused on detailed studies of men and age organizations among the Jie (1953) and Turkana tribes of East Africa (1958).

While most research specific to gerontocratic African tribes deals nearly exclusively with men and their participation in the age set system, few researchers have ventured to examine the life experience of women. Levine (1979) produced extensive ethnographic data on wives and mothers of the East African Gusii tribe. Mair (1969, 1950) as well as Evans-Pritchard (1950), examined changes in East African marriage customs, shedding light on the experience of young women. While information from these studies is valuable, it deals primarily with the early years of womens' life span. Few accounts shed light on womens' experience past being a betrothable maiden and young mother. The question arises: What is the experience of aging women in a society traditionally dominated by elder males?

If ethnographic study of gerontocratic societies is to make a representative contribution to cross cultural gerontology, research must be comprehensive. Such comprehensive appraisal demands the impartial survey of both genders. Rossi (1985) in her book, Gender and the Life Course, establishes the relationship between gender and life experience and demonstrates a likelihood of gender inequalities structuring the experience of old age. If this is true, then the experience of aging women may be drastically different than that of aging men in age set societies.

My interest in the life of aging women in gerontocratic societies was initially sparked by their relatively low visibility as compared with their male counterparts in the Samburu Village of Karare, Kenya. Additionally, an examination of existing literature provided only minimal commentaries on aging women in tribal societies, leaving many questions unanswered. It should also be noted that nearly all existing research was published by western investigators. The tradition of social science research has only recently been attended to by Kenyan or East African nationals. The intent of this study is to begin to illuminate the experience of aging women in a traditional gerontocratic society, focusing on their roles and status.

The following will present essential background information on Samburu culture followed by ethnographic data, discussion, and finally conclusions drawn from this study.

## Who Are the Aged?

There is little agreement on the definitions of age. References to the elderly in western society are commonly based on chronological age and are often formulated for statistical convenience rather than based on meaningful sociological concepts (Lee, 1986). The advantage of age being defined in chronological terms is that everyone has a clear and common understanding of what aging means. The disadvantage is that chronology does not reveal much about the similarities or characteristics of people of similar age(Kovach and Knapp,1989). Categorization of elderly into "young old" and "old old" by Neugatren (1968) is an attempt to capture the diversity of the aging population.

In many non-western societies, chronology has little to do with the calculation of old age (Rubenstein, 1986). The demographic heterogeneity of the aging population in lesser developed regions, thoroughly discussed by Hoover and Segal (1968), makes a common reference for old age problematic. Furthermore, the considerable variation in life expectancy from province to province in Kenya, where this study was conducted, makes a single chronological reference irrelevant. For example, in 1969, the life expectancy in Nairobi Province, an urban region, was 11 years longer than in Central Province, a rural region, and 16 years longer than North Eastern Province, a bush region where the life expectancy is 43.9 for males and

46.2 for females (Kenya National Government, 1979). United Nations population studies indicate life expectancy at birth in the world's lesser developed regions during 1975-1980 was 48.6 years, while in the more developed regions of the world it was 71.9 for the same time period (United Nations, 1981).

As a consequence of short life expectancy, physiologic, as well as social and cultural aging are accelerated. Harsh environment, poor nutrition, and limited health care lead to rapid physical degeneration. Some social institutions are geared according to biological processes. In Samburu culture, males enter elderhood in the third decade, while girls enter womanhood upon a marriage arranged as soon after puberty as possible (Spencer, 1965). Aging males are easily socially identified by their age set which also defines their roles. The transitions from wife to mother to post menarche old woman are not culturally indicated. They occur on a relatively unmarked continuum from the point of marriage.

Thus, in Kenya, as in many societies, defining the aged in meaningful terms is difficult. I asked many villagers in Karare, of both genders and of all ages what indicated old age? The most common responses translated into frailty, infirmity, senility, incontinence, and changes in physical appearance such as graying of hair and wrinkling of skin. Physical appearance, performance, and mental status are apparently the chief indicators of old age. In brief, biological markers rather than chronological were significant in determining old age. For the purposes of

this study I have chosen to define the aged in the same manner as the Samburus. Recognizing old age must be considered within the context of the life course, rather than as an isolated phenomenon, ethnographic data will focus on women from the point of their marriage through the remainder of the life course.

## Backround Research on the Samburus

While many significant strains compose Samburu culture, gerontocracy, pastoralism, and polygany (the practice of men having more than one wife), emerge as dominant themes. As the traditional system contrasts sharply to modern western societies (Mair, 1969), subsequent data will have greater meaning if one is familiarized with these themes. Foner (1984) has validated the importance of studying aging contextually. Therefore, in the following, I will attempt to discuss the significance and interrelatedness of gerontocracy, pastoralism, and polygany and the points where they intersect the lives' of women.

The Samburu are a pastoralist tribe indigenous to East Africa. Their territory, the so called Marsabit District of North Central Kenya, is among the least developed regions in the nation. This territory, covering approximately 18,000 km2, is essentially scrub desert, thick with thorn bush and lava rock. Water is scarce and rains are unreliable. The desert lowlands are interrupted at intervals by forested hills which are suffering from rapid deforestation. In this harsh environment, there are approximately 73,000 Samburus (Kenya National Government, 1979).

Ethnically, the Samburus are classed as Masai, their kinship with the larger Masai tribe being confirmed by close similarities of language and custom. Both practice a patrilineal heritage, the patrilineal clan being the most important level of the segmentary descent system and the most significant social unit. Residences are patrilocally organized. The visible domestic unit is a homestead which is several huts arranged in a cluster, the residents being one elder stock owner and his wives and dependents. The elder male stockholders in each lineage play a major role in the life of the clan.

Samburu society is governed by a gerontocratic system. Authority and power is vested in the hands of the elders, the male senior age set. Therefore, they are revered and respected above all other members of the clan. Their chief role is ruling the clan although there are no institutional positions of power and their authority is not formally defined. The elders are responsible for the moral education and the creation of the sense of respect of the younger members of the clan. Land and livestock discrepancies, family feuds, discipline problems and social concerns are brought before the elders who act as jury judges. The Samburu rely only to a minimal extent on Kenya's formal government, essentially governing themselves.

Autonomy and economic independence are Samburu ideals all elders strive to achieve. Ultimately they are symbolized by large herds and a large

family which is obtained by marrying several wives. Spencer (1965) notes that these goals are rarely obtained. It is a fact of a pastoral collective economy that each stock owner and his homestead are dependent upon their neighbors. It is this interdependence which accounts for the strong corporate nature of the clan.

In the traditional pastoral society, livestock are the clan's livelihood and currency. All significant transactions are marked by the exchange of livestock and ceremonial activities are marked with their sacrifice. Baxter and Almagor (1978), explain this in the following:

> One of the few generalizations we can make about pastoral societies is that social relationships run close to stock relationships and that stock have the property of creating and transmitting social relationships. Relationships which require durability and resilence require reinforcement by property sharing or property exchanging (p.78).

This is demonstrated in Samburu marriage custom. A dowry is agreed upon between the bride's father and the groom. The payment is made in the form of livestock, including cows, sheep and goats. A marriage agreement cannot be finalized without the transfer of livestock.

Polygany is practiced on a wide scale in Samburu culture. It is the acceptable norm rather than the exception. According to traditional practice, elders are the only age set permitted to marry; as a result,

there are a large number of young women married to men many years their senior. The most desirable age for women to be betrothed is at puberty. Mair (1969), observed that girls at this age are not expected to have a reliable opinion regarding a suitable mate. Marriage arrangements are made between the elders and the bride's kin in the best interest of both parties.

Gerontocracy, pastoralism and polygany are deeply enmeshed in Samburu culture. The fact that they have a considerable impact on the lives of women is indisputable. To some extent the nature of the impact will be revealed in subsequent ethnographic data.

Methods

Karare is located in North Central Kenya, just inside the southern border of Marsabit District, 200 kilometers south of the Ethiopian border. Karare is geographically isolated. It is twelve hours north of Nairobi via motorvehicle on an unpaved road. This unpaved road is the singular highway from Nairobi to northern Kenya and Ethiopia. Visitors in the village of Karare are rare as the village is 5 kilometers from the main highway. Motor vehicles do not pass through the village except for those belonging to government officials or relief workers. Here aproximately 2,000 Samburu reside among 300 homesteads (FHI,1985).

Karare was nearly devastated by the well publicized "Ethiopian" famine which was most severe from 1983-1985. During this critical time, a strong

bond and mutual respect developed between the local British relief worker named Geoffrey, and the villagers. He was the only famine relief worker in the village. He lived among the villagers and was responsible for coordinating and operationalizing food relief. He also provided fundamental first-aid and transportation to Marsabit District Hospital, 30 kilometers north of Karare.

I arrived in Karare in early 1986. The village was slowly recovering from the effects of the drought and subsequent famine. The rains had come and the land showed the promise of green vegetation. As Geoffrey's new wife, I was warmly welcomed and accepted by the villagers. We were frequently guests in villagers homes as they shared their hospitality. More than fifteen different families shared their homes and meals with us throughout the following year. Being guests in the villagers' homes provided opportunities for me to observe the family unit within the most natural context.

During my time in Karare I stayed on the relief and development workers' compound. The compound was a clearing which consisted of three prefabricated shelters constructed of plastic-coated cardboard, an outdoor latrine, a newly planted experimental vegetable garden, and banana trees. It was home for two relief workers, and two Samburu men, hired by the relief workers. The compound was centrally located in the village. My observations of the villagers' activity in and around the compound led me to believe it had become the unofficial village center.

Women came to the compound requesting food or medical treatment for their families. Children played games in the compound clearing. Elders gathered to talk among themselves and, very obviously, observe the wazungu (white person, plural). Many villagers would come requesting transportation on the relief workers' landrover. This center of activity provided exellent opportunities for me to collect data by observation and casual interaction with men, women and children.

As Geoffrey's wife, I had privileges which I observed were not extended to Samburu women such as attending elders' village meetings, engaging in conversation with men of any age, and attending festive goat roasts. All these experiences provided opportunities for me to be a participant observer of village life and participate in conversation. These opportunities also enabled me to understand the cultural context of aging womens' experience, my primary research objective.

In addition to being Geoffrey's wife, a second factor contributed to my privleges and the bond which quickly developed between myself and the villagers, particularly the women. Local health care was virtually non-existent. I was a nurse and offered first aid and health instruction. Only two days after my arrival in Karare a village woman approached me with her ill child. In the days and months that followed, other women brought their co-wives, mothers-in-law, and other kin.

Administering health care provided opportunities for discussion with women of all ages in a setting that was somewhat intimate, without the intimidation of men. I did not attempt to conduct formal interviews or surveys, but made a consistent effort to engage women in conversation on the themes of wife, mother, and kinswoman. If this conversation did not naturally evolve, I told them I believed that their lives seemed different in many ways from mine and I was interested in learning about theirs. They were curious about my life and often responded with questions such as, "How many children will you have?" "When?" " Do you know how to cook chipatis?" Many times there was a mutual and satisfying exchange of information and the initiation of friendships that fostered continued sharing.

Ethnographic data collection was initially aimed at answering the question, "What is the experience of aging women in traditional gerontocratic Samburu society?" However, after becoming familiar with Samburu culture and the every day lives of women, I refined the questions to the following: How are the roles of wife, mother and kinswoman played out by women? How do the roles change as women grow older? What status is attributed to women? Does womens' status change with age?

Data was collected over a period of one year during 1986-1987, in the Samburu village of Karare. I was somewhat of an opportunist and considered everyday in the village an opportunity to learn from what was happening

around me. Data was gathered chiefly by participant observation as well as through non-structured interviews and conversation with villagers.

## Womens' Roles

In Samburu culture major separations are recognized between the domains of men and women. While elder male roles pertain largely to social and political realms, womens' roles are nearly entirely within the domestic realm. This portion of the paper centers on the dominant roles of adult Samburu women and evidence of how these roles are played out in every day life.

### Wives

Shortly after arriving in Karare, Songa, an older mama, brought another older mama named Waisu to me at the compound with concern regarding Waisu's swollen ankles. These mamas were well aware I was recently married. The conversation led easily to our experiences as new wives. I was told by these women that when they were married they had to learn to fulfill the roles of wife, mother, and kinswoman. Reflecting on their own experience, they talked of how life abruptly changed upon the arrangement of their marriages. Both of them recalled leaving their family of origin and moving to their new husband's homestead. Songa said she was her husband's first wife. She moved into his hut and cooked and cared for him daily, until he took a second wife four years later. He was no longer a permanent resident of the hut Songa and he shared since their marriage. He spent much of his

time in his younger wife's hut. Songa did not tell the story with any apparent resentment but rather communicated a sense of relief in relinquishing the daily responsibility of serving her husband.

Waisu was her husbands second wife. She spoke of building her own hut in her husband's homestead, next to his first wife's. Waisu recalled feeling initially as though she were being subordinated by her co-wife until she proved she was capable of her new responsibilities including, maintaining the hut, gathering firewood, collecting water, and cooking. Waisu smiled at me and said it was only a short while before she and her co-wife became friends.

Waisu and Songa shared with me that each woman in the homestead is responsible for maintaining her own hut. If a husband is not present, there are always children and kinfolk to feed which necessitates collecting water, and maintaining a fire in the hut for cooking and warmth. Waisu stated that she and her co-wife shared the tasks of keeping the open areas of the manyata swept and carrying the herd's milk to the market.

In reflecting on their past, Songa and Waisu communicated a sense of pride that they had successfully accomplished what they perceived was expected of them as wives. The pride and contentment evident in Songa and Waisu was not, however, apparent in all the village women.

A village girl in her early teens, named Airelle, whom I had not seen for quite some time was now adorned in a manner which indicated she had

been married. She was returning from the marketplace where she had sold the daily portion of milk from her husband's herd's. I asked her how she liked being married? She cast her eyes down and paused for a long time then responded, "I do not like it. I miss my friends too much." The transition from young girl to wife was drastic for Airelle as her primary obligation was now to her husband and the domestic duties required to run the homestead.

Spencer (1965), commented that "above all the Samburu woman devotes herself to rearing a family of her own"(p.226). His conclusion parallels my observation of Samburu women in every day life. It was rare to see them indulge in an activity other than childcare or domestic chores. Perhaps there is not time or energy for anything else. From my observations, it appears a disproportionate amount of physical labor is allotted to Samburu women. Mair (1969), noted similar observations in the following:

> It is the wife's work to sweep, to grind, to cook, to build the fire, and to clean out the cattle partition. She carries the water from the spring, buys the cooking pots, and gathers firewood. She cleans the walls of the house and the surface of the yard and beats the floor of the house (in order that the floor may become hard and level).

I observed a daily task drawing the women away from the homestead is collecting water. In Karare, the water source is five kilometers from

most homesteads. Nearly half the women in the village passed by the compound every morning on their way to the water source. The water supply was frequently low due to the recent drought so the trip was necessary in the morning and the evening. I often walked to the water source in the morning to talk with the women and observe this ritual. The water source proved to be a very social spot, for nearly all the village women convene there at the same time. The women greet one another with familiarity and without reserve, always with much chatter, singing, and laughter. Their interaction seemed genuine and spontaneous. Collecting water is a lengthy ritual, as the women have to wait a long time as each fills their cans. They shared each others burdens by hoisting the containers of water onto each others back and securing them with rope for the long walk home. It was not uncommon to see two wives of the same elder helping one another in this manner. Nor was it uncommon to see elderly mamas making the five kilometer journey to the water source.

On one occasion I observed a mazungu (white man, singular), offer to help one of the younger girls with her full water container. His offer was met with restrained giggles and a hint of embarassment. I was told by one of the women, "this is not mens' work." It was obvious young and old women alike perceived this daily task as their responsibility. I never observed a Samburu elder carring water or in the area of the water source at the time the women were collecting it.

Collecting firewood was also a daily ritual. Fires are kept burning in the hut for cooking and for warmth during the cold, rainy season. Gathering firewood is not a social or corporate activity like collecting water. From the compound I could observe each woman going her own direction into a wooded area and returning hunched over by the enormous bundle of wood she had tied to her back. Young girls and old women were not exempt from this chore as long as they were strong.

Cooking is exclusively womens' responsibility. As stated previously, I was frequently a guest in villagers' homes. The evening meal usually commenced within a few hours after dark. The Samburu do not adhere to a rigid schedule. We were summoned to dinner when it was nearly ready. Each instance was the same; the woman was making final meal preparations over a small open fire in the corner of the hut while the men hosted conversation. The fire was just large enough to accomodate one pot, yet a full meal, which was begun hours before, was prepared and served with pride. A typical meal served to us consisted of a mixture of boiled corn and potatoes, chipatis (flour cakes, similar to tortillas), occasionally stewed goat, and always chi (tea).

On one occasion at the home of an elder named Salango, a group of elders, wazungu and myself were guests for dinner. The men brought in skins and small stools for everyone to sit on. Salango's junior wife and

two other kinswomen who helped prepare the meal brought it to the door of the hut where we were. The women stood in the doorway very attentive to the activities within. One of the mazungu petitioned Salango to let the women join us but the petition was rejected. Throughout the evening the women stood timidly in the doorway, actively listening to conversation of the elders and visitors but not participating. It was my experience that hospitality was always offered with grace, whether the mama had invited guests home or her husband had arrived with guests unannounced.

I observed that domestic duties remain consistent throughout life; however, many older mamas, in addition to Songa and Waisu, indicated that as they grow older, they tend to have less time and service obligations to their spouses. Older women consistently reported that husbands tend to spend their time in the huts of their junior wives.

Throughout the marriage, husbands spend a great deal of time away from the homestead. Reasons for this include the responsibility of herding the livestock or visiting friends and relatives in another village. One curious phenomenon was that whenever a vehicle came through the village, elders seemed to spontaneously appear, requesting passage to wherever the vehicle was going. It seemed as though the Elders who were free to go did so to accomodate their nomadic nature. In one instance an elder named Llamo brought to me his wife who was pregnant and

experiencing some physical difficulties. I instructed her and her spouse that she should rest daily and refrain from carrying firewood and water until the baby was born. Her husband listened attentively and agreed. This was a rare public demonstration of concern displayed by a man for his wife and I was touched. Moments later, however, the landrover engine revved outside in the compound and Llamo was requesting transit to Marsabit, 30 kilometers north. I inquired how long he would be gone and he replied with uncertainty, perhaps several days. His wife did not seem observably troubled by her spouses absence or anxious about his return. This may have been because the element of companionship in marriage appeared only rarely. Elders could typically be seen around the village from morning until after dark, talking in small groups away from the women and children. Mair (1969) comments that the "importance of procreation as the chief end in marriage, and the importance of securing legitimate descendents accounts for most African marriages.."

The sociocultural value of marriage was demonstrated immediately upon my initial arrival in the village. The villagers had been anticipating our visit as a result of radio communication between Geoffrey and the other relief workers. When we arrived in the compound, several children surrounded our landrover waving and smiling. Elders quickly appeared and shooed the children away in order that they might greet us. We were informed that a goat had been roasted in honor of our recent marriage.

Women called later that day and in the days that followed with wedding gifts for me of handmade beaded jewelry, including a fertility necklace. It was apparent by this reception that the Samburus perceived our marriage and the likelihood of children as a cause for celebration.

Marriage is an important part of every woman's identity. If a woman is very young when her husband dies, she is likely to have many more children fathered by anonymous men in the village. All of her children are given her late husband's name. This was the case with Chonga. Chonga was a widow who appeared to be in her thirties. The two resident relief workers hired Chonga to do their wash twice weekly. As a result, I saw her at the compound frequently. She had five children ranging from toddlers to adolesence. She told me her husband passed away aproximately eight years ago and made no attempt to explain the subsequent birth of two children. All of the children had her late husband's name, and Chonga was still known as Lesurmat's wife. Her marriage, though short, gave her lasting identity.

Mothers

Samburu women are expected to conceive immediately after marriage. I learned from the health clinic at Marsabit Hospital that birth control is not culturally acceptable or desirable; occasionally, however, Samburu women request birth control confidentially. Rearing children accounts for most of the energy of the Samburu woman's adult life, as she has an average

of seven living children (Kenya National Government, 1979).

Children are an obvious source of pride. Babies are always toted around on their mothers back or side securely in her shawl. If asked to see the baby, mothers would lift a corner of the shawl in a manner suggesting a view of her most prized possession. All the while she beams.

Co-wives look after one another's children without discerning, at least in appearance, which children are hers and which belong to her co-wife. This is illustrated in the case of Abdi. Abdi was a bright boy, fourteen years old, fluent in English. In his homestead, his father's two wives' huts were side by side. He would sleep, eat, or spend time in alternate huts and referred to both women as his mothers. He did not make an effort to distinguish between his biological mother and her co-wife. He felt equally cared for by both.

Mothers' relationships with sons are more tangible then with daughters, as daughters leave the homestead at an early age. Sons remain a part of everyday life. They are of special importance for two reasons: 1) Adult sons are a source of honor to the clan, and 2) Sons are responsible for parents in their old age. Elder men are cared for by their wives, but old mamas who typically survive their spouses are dependent on their sons. Although each wife has her own hut in the settlement, as Sangree (1966) pointed out, "She can in fact receive respect and amenities of old age only if she has her own son, and better yet, two, to look after her own interests" (p. 146).

When the older woman's children are grown, her daily role still correlates strongly with mothering responsibilities. She is rarely removed from the care of youngsters. There are always her grandchildren and young children of her husband's junior wives about the homestead.

Kin Relationships

This section will discuss kin relationships focusing on those that pertain to Samburu womens' roles as mother-in-law, grandmother, and co-wife. This portion of data was the easiest and most enjoyable to collect. It became obvious in observing interaction with kinfolk and talking about families that there is pleasure associated with these relationships. In contrast to her role as wife, which is somewhat narrowly defined, kin relationships have an element of flexibility and are the channnel for the individual woman's personality to surface.

While males spend much of their time in association with other age mates and friends; women do not have friends in the formal sense that men do. I did not observe women standing in clusters around the village, talking with cohorts. Perhaps women are too immersed in family responsibilities to invest time in such relationships. Men have friends, women have kin. Kin relationships are nearly the totality of all female interpersonal relationships. They change in character throughout life and new ones, such as grandparenting, develop with aging. From what I observed, kin relationships are a woman's livelihood throughout her years.

A woman's formative years of marriage are spent building relationships with her spouses clan, particularly her co-wives. The wives of one elder are more likely to form an alliance than become rivals. They are united in sympathy and mutual support against their husband. The husband must accept that he is an outsider in their relationship. Co-wives are more or less equals. This, itself fosters a bond as they are both subordinate to their mutual husband.

The fact that co-wives are virtually neighbors in the same homestead means they are an integral part of one another's daily lives. Young and old co-wives cooperate in the duties of the homestead. It was not uncommon to see the senior and junior wives of one elder helping one another in the daily task of collecting water or working side by side in the marryata. They generally appeared to enjoy a relationship that had many of the qualities of friendship.

Relationships between mothers and daughters-in-law do not always share the same qualities of comraderie. According to Spencer (1965), mothers have a position in their sons' homes; however, my conversations with women in Karare suggests this may be offset by the daughter-in-law who often sets the tone of the environment in her husband's absence. Friction between mother and daughter-in-law is accepted and common. One older mama named Solami had raised three daughters and two sons. Solami now lives with her

eldest son and his two wives . She commented, "It is the daughters who really care, not the sons wives." Another older mama , Karifu, made the following statement with notable sadness of voice and expression: "A daughter has a heart for her mother but she has gone to live with her husband's clan." Discussions with Solami and Karifu occurred during my visit to their homestead while their daughters-in-law were collecting water or firewood.

A middle aged mama reported the following, seemingly reflecting on her own future:

> When you are an old widow sons are responsible for you. This means when you can't take care of yourself any longer and keep up with your own hut and shamba, it is divided up among your sons and you go to live with your first born son in his part of the homestead. What really happens is your daughter-in-law takes care of you... if you are lucky. But you cannot be sure how she will treat you. If you are neglected by her it is the children who will see that you have a skin to sleep on and food to eat.

There was every indication that many had successful relationships and were able to cohabit quite comfortably. One mama with such a relationship stated, "It is to your advantage to try to make a happy relationhip with your daughters-in-law from the time your sons bring them to the homestead. You must live with them for your life."

At any age the kinswoman's contribution to the families subsistence, although not highly valued, is direct and indispensable. While Samburu women are viewed by Samburu men as totally dependent, their children often survive on their strength and resourcefulness. With increasing age and fraility, however, more old women come to rely on others for help with routine day-to-day chores of running and maintaining the home. Eventually, the older women may move into huts of their daughters-in-law. Co-wives and daughters-in-law provide older mamas with assistance with daily tasks such as gathering water and firewood and preparing meals. In the event that frailty or infirmity prohibits older mamas from these tasks, they take on whatever simple tasks they can do in the homestead. Frequently they spend a greater proportion of time doing handcrafts. It was common to see an older mama sitting in the grass near the homestead making baskets or doing bead work while young children played around her. The older mamas would assume child care responsibilities for the younger children while daughters-in-law gathered water and firewood.

Older mamas also contribute to maintenance of the hut. While they may be too feeble to construct it independently, I observed them on occasion sitting in the manyata tying bundles of grass for repairing the thatched roof. Although weakened in old age, the women appeared to find methods of making a domestic contribution consistent with their former years.

Status

In attempting to gather information on the status of women in Karare, it quickly became apparent that considering the status of women was culturally unfamiliar. Furthermore, engaging villagers in discussions on the topic was culturally inappropriate. Women were not accustomed to being reflective and introspective, and were reluctant to talk about themselves. Men seemed to think the topic trivial.

From the male point of view, status belongs strictly to men. Women have no influence politically and economically. It is accepted and anticipated that every older male will strive to achieve a measure of economic independence and autonomy. However, traditional practice offers no method for older women to achieve similar goals. As cited earlier (Spenser, 1965), Samburus have a pastoral economy and women are prohibited from making transactions with livestock. Therefore, women never obtain the security or status resulting from economic independence. In their later years, women look forward to living with and depending on their adult sons and their families. A woman's security comes from affiliation with the clan.

While status for women is a contradiction in terms to Samburu men, what does emerge as a measure of a woman's worth is her family. A large and

respectful family brings honor to the clan and women are thus acknowledged secondarily. Fulfilling the roles of mother and wife are the only way to insure the clan's honor. Conversely, women may bring shame and dishonor to the clan, if perscribed female roles are not fulfilled.

Women have an inferior status, instilled at a very early age, and throughout life. Even the most assertive women accept it as a basic fact of existence (Spencer,1965). A publication on the Samburu intended for tourists and produced by Kenyan nationals (Kenya Ministry of Tourism, 1982) states, "Women have no particular value in the society as they are not destined to remain in the clan." The patrilocal residence pattern dictates married women leave their natal clan to live with their husband's family. The patrilineal system ensures male inheritance patterns and the passing of lineage to the sons of each generation. The preference for sons, because of their value to the lineage, is reflected in the following report from Naroca, a middle aged woman from the village: "My mother had many children. I have seven sisters and only three brothers. I remember every time my mother gave birth to a girl baby my father beat her cabeza (completely). He said girl babies weren't worth the smallest coins in his pocket."

As youngsters, girls are subordinated by their mothers, and as young brides, they are subordinated by their husbands. In time, the woman

establishes some position within the clan by raising a family. The greatest honor she can eventually bring to the clan is the proper rearing of children. Following a village elders' meeting I had the opportunity to consult with several elders. They were obviously happy to share their opinions and thought it was proper that I consulted them. The group consensus was that if a woman has "successfully" raised her children, her daughters will become respectful wives who fulfill the roles of wife, mother, and kinswoman. The sons of a successful mother will progress through their age grades with their cohorts, eventually becoming warriors and finally respected elders. This is acknowledged when sons are initiated into the warrior age set. By this time, if still alive, she is most likely a very old woman. Position in the clan is not significantly elevated at this point, but affirmed secondarily by the honor and respect bestowed upon sons.

Spencer (1965), describes the point of the sons initiation to elderhood as the pinnacle of a woman's status during her lifetime. I was unable to identify any significant behaviors or attitudes which indicated a notably improved status of eldery women among junior wives or other kinswomen.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to explore the often overlooked patterns of aging women in a gerontocratic society. Living in the village of Karare for extended intervals over the period of one year provided the opportunity

for gathering rich ethnographic data. Although I could speak conversational Swahili, language was at times a barrier to interpreting subtle social meanings. While the Samburu are extremely hospitable and share their homes as well as their ceremonies and celebrations, it was my sense that a Westerner remains an outsider and can never expect to be privy to certain tribal information. Therefore, the observations and actual dialogue reported here may be biased, or at least limited in certain respects, and may present more favorable aspects of the society. The Samburu are a proud people and I suspect were not inclined to reveal societal or tribal problems.

In Samburu society, prevailing norms dictate the life course of women. The only socially respectable path for women is as a wife, mother, and kinswoman. Life is not complicated by a series of choices. Minimal role stress appears the norm as there is little ambiguity or conflict with regard to prescribed roles throughout the life course. Samburu women were noticeably content. They appeared to be women of simple tastes and few wants, except for sufficient shelter, food, a husband, many children, and the reciprocal care of kinfolk in old age. All women were united by the shared desire to achieve these goals.

Their functional role is consistent throughout life and changes only marginally due to aging and associated physiological declines. Even in the

face of infirmity, elderly women remain enmeshed in family and domestic life as they live and die in the homestead of their husbands.

The quality of relationships between older women and their adult sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren and co-wives have a considerable impact on life in the later years. While old age alone is reason for elderly women to receive respect, deference, and attentive assistance in many Eastern cultures, this does not seem to be the case among the Samburu. Women who have cultivated kin relationships and maintained them, particularly among their sons and his dependents, are likely to receive the most attentive assistance and care when they become infirm.

Kinswomen seem to maintain a certain degree of integrity and loyalty to one another. This is evidenced in the alliance between co-wives against a mutual husband, mutual assistance in child care, and helping behavior in daily tasks which are physically demanding. Relationships endure for a lifetime and often outlast the marriage which made them kinfolk in the first place.

The infrastructure of Samburu society, based on gerontocracy, polygany, and pastoralism is one which allots little status or value directly to women, even in their old age. From a Western viewpoint, where personal freedom is perhaps the most highly valued possession, the gerontocratic system may seem to be an unjust one. There is no mechanism for Samburu

women to achieve economic or social independence. Although they play an indispensible role, there seems to be little value or status equated with it. The irony is that both sexes are mutually dependent. Elders cannot achieve autonomy and independence without the assistance of their wives. Women have no place in society without a husband.

Contrary to Western and modern cultures, the lives of these women had a remarkable degree of predictability and stability, something these women seemed to find comfortable. If there were women who were unhappy with the traditional Samburu system, they did not make themselves known. Only the young adolescent bride revealed any discontent.

My observations led me to believe the traditional gerontocratic system still is very strong in Karare. It seems inevitable that modernization and urbanization, however, will also have an impact on the Samburus. The penetration of a cash economy into this pastoral way of life would mean younger clan members will migrate to urban areas for paying jobs. This was not a common occurence in Karare, but there was some concern among the village elders about the increasing trend in other villages. Should modernization touch the Samburu of Karare, it is likely that many elderly women may be left without the protection of their family. While one can only speculate, it is most probable that competing needs for limited national resources would delay the mobilization of any services for elderly

women in rural areas. Maternal and child health issues now consume nearly all the government's health and social service initiatives as Kenya has the highest birth rate (4%) in the world (Kenya National Government, 1979).

While national and international efforts are concentrating on maternal and child health needs, as opposed to those of the elderly, it is of great significance that more than one half of the world's elderly are in lesser developed nations. Yet little is known about aging women in many of these cultures. Future research is needed to explore the experience of aging women in gerontocratic societies in order to have a more complete cross-cultural understanding of the aging experience throughout human society.

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